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## THE RELATION OF BIBLICAL TO SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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It is not many years since the term theology, used without qualification, was, in this country at least, understood to mean systematic theology. If there existed here and there a chair of biblical theology, this title did not designate a different discipline from that which elsewhere was called systematic theology, but only indicated a desire to put emphasis upon the Bible as the great source for theology. In more recent years, however, following the Germans in this as in many other things, we have adopted the term biblical theology to designate a branch of study distinct from systematic theology. To many no doubt the distinction between the two fields of study is perfectly clear, and any discussion of their interrelation wholly superfluous. Yet one constantly encounters evidence that the relation is still hazily defined in some minds, even in quarters where one would least expect to find it. It is probably not an instance of such haziness that the veteran Berlin theologian, Professor Bernhard Weiss, who published years ago his work on *The Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, has recently issued an entirely new volume bearing the title *The Religion of the New Testament*, in which he endeavors to set forth the unity underlying that diversity of doctrine which his previous volume had exhibited. But in the publication of such a book, which is neither biblical theology in the modern sense, nor systematic theology proper, the general reader is likely to find occasion of stumbling and confusion of thought as to where the line is drawn between biblical and systematic theology.

Moreover, to fix a boundary is not always to define relations, as diplomats have often had occasion to discover. The present article has been written in the hope of contributing somewhat to clearness of thought on both these points: the line of demarcation and the relation between the two fields of study, biblical theology and sys-

tematic theology. Its form, that of a series of theses, is not, in the intention of the writer at least, expressive of a dogmatic spirit or attitude toward the problem, but is adopted in the interest of clearness and brevity. What is here set forth may be regarded as a hypothesis the validity of which is to be determined, not by proving each proposition, but by its ability as a whole to satisfy the data of the problem.

1. Biblical theology is a historical science, having to do with the history of biblical thought, i. e., the history of the religious experience and thinking of men so far as it is reflected in or discoverable from the Bible and other literature closely connected therewith. It is a part of the history of the Hebrew people. In its New Testament portion it is a part of the history of Christianity, specifically of the beginnings of Christian thought. It deals not with facts in isolation or the mere cataloguing of facts, but like all history seeks out relations, causal and influential connections.

2. Systematic theology cannot be defined without including a reference to its purpose. It is a normative science in the sense that it seeks to ascertain not what happened in the past, but what is now and constantly true. For however the theologian may confess that his interpretation of the world is likely to be superseded in the thought of those who come after him, so that his work is for his own generation and is not intended to bind the thought of succeeding generations, yet what he is *seeking* is the unchanging facts and possible attainments in the realm of religious experience. His theology is his attempt to state the permanent realities of religion. Aiming first at clearness and correctness of thought in this sphere, it seeks through such clear and correct thinking to promote the development of religious life. In its specific form of Christian theology it concerns itself especially with the experience of men under Christianity, finding in this field its chief data, and aiming at the development and rational control of religious experience of the Christian type.

Systematic theology assumes that there is such a thing as human religious experience, that it is worthful and capable of development, and that it may be developed through a knowledge of past experience. In its specific form of Christian theology it builds upon the conviction that Hebrew and Christian experience is in the large an

exceptionally high type of religious experience and therefore exceptionally worthy of study for the development of experience.

3. Biblical theology has as its principal sources the books of the Bible. Biblical criticism and biblical interpretation are prerequisites to the successful accomplishment of its task, the former to determine the order of the component elements of the literature, the latter to discover their meaning. As adjuncts of its work it requires: (a) biblical history in the more external sense of the word; (b) knowledge of contemporary history and thought in so far as these in any way influenced Hebrew and Christian biblical thought; and (c) psychological insight to distinguish between testimony to experience and interpretation of experience, in order through the latter to reach the former, and to discover possible or probable connections of thought. In part because of this dependence of biblical theology upon other sciences, and the practical impossibility of attaining completeness or perfection in these sciences, biblical theology can never do more than to achieve its aim approximately.

4. Systematic theology has its only possible source in human experience as known either through the consciousness of the theologian or through credible testimony or trustworthy historical record. Revelation is no exception to this statement, since only as it enters into experience can it become a source of knowledge. Even the incarnation is no exception. For if incarnation means to us a man in whom the Spirit of God dwelt in all fulness, then it is only through his human experience of God communicated to men that they can learn of God and his relation to men. If it means to us God dwelling in human flesh, it is only through human experience that that God can be attested to men as God or enter into communication with them. Historic facts are no exception; for the records of the past are either recorded experiences or recorded interpretations of experience. Since this is so, it is evident that systematic theology as well as biblical theology is in large measure dependent on the results of historical study. Yet inasmuch as experience is not all in the recorded past, but is a present possession also, systematic theology is only in part dependent on recorded history, while biblical theology is wholly so. The fundamental difference, however, is that biblical theology reaches its goal in what is historically true, while systematic theology

is not systematic theology at all until it discovers what furnishes such evidence of being normatively true as to commend itself as such to men of the present.

These preliminary definitions of the two sciences and their respective sources bring us to our subject: What is the relation of biblical to systematic theology? More specifically, How does biblical theology make its contribution to systematic theology? We answer:

5. Biblical theology cannot make its contribution to systematic theology on the basis of the assumption that all the convictions held by those who have been, so to speak, the bearers of the Hebrew and Christian religious experience are true and can be built upon in present-day experience. For not only have we no positive and sufficient ground for affirming the perfect normality of these experiences and convictions, but we have positive reason for not affirming such normality in the fact that these convictions are in many cases mutually contradictory.

6. Systematic theology cannot construct its system simply from those things on which all biblical writers are agreed, for in many particulars it is precisely those things on which the biblical writers are not in agreement on which we most need clear convictions for the direction of our lives.

7. Systematic theology cannot assume that the movement of thought which is reflected in the Bible and which it is the business of biblical theology to trace out and expound is an evolution in which each succeeding stage represents a closer approximation to the truth. For if this is assumed it is pure assumption; if it is affirmed as proved, it is in the face of the facts and the evidence. It would put Paul above Jesus and the Apocalypse above them both. It would logically issue in accepting the present-day thought as the highest and making the study of biblical thought itself unnecessary for the purpose of systematic theology. Moreover, the stream of biblical thought has at times turned back upon itself, thought recurring to earlier forms. The theory thus issues in the contradiction that *a* is higher than *b* and *b* higher than *a*.

8. Systematic theology cannot make the convictions of any single person or group of persons an ultimate standard by which the judgments and experiences of all others are to be tested or the norm to

which all present-day and future experiences should conform. For if it assumes this *a priori*, the whole system begins in an assumption and is without stable foundation. If it affirms this on the ground of evidence establishing the normative character of the experiences and convictions of this one person, then either in this very process it assumes a standard outside this person by comparison with which it is enabled to affirm the normative character of his experience and convictions, and in that case he is no longer the standard; or it conceives that the normality of this person is established by authoritative testimony, in which case again the ultimate authority is outside this person; or the normality of this one person's experience is supposed to be established by external evidence; but it is impossible to see how any strictly external evidence can establish such a proposition. Of course if this claim is to be made it will be made on behalf of Christ, or Christ and his apostles, and with most probability surely on behalf of Christ. Shall this claim be based upon the supernatural birth? But even aside from the impossibility of proving historically that his birth was supernatural and the fact that he himself based no claim of authority on the facts respecting his origin and birth, it is impossible to see how the substitution of a special exercise of divine power for human paternity can guarantee infallible teaching. Then Adam, assuming for a moment the point of view of the Genesis writer, is doubly guaranteed as infallible, for in his case divine power takes the place of both maternity and paternity. Will the miracles that Jesus wrought give us the necessary basis? But no ability to do extraordinary deeds even though they be miracles by the mediaeval definition, events contrary to or outside of natural law, can prove inerrancy in teaching or absolute normality of experience. The gospels record that Jesus admitted that his contemporaries wrought miracles, but he certainly did not concede their authority in religion. Shall the claim be based on his resurrection? The same answer must be made as respecting his supernatural birth. Shall it rest upon his deity? But the New Testament forbids us to affirm of him unconditioned deity, affirming that it was conditioned by humanity, and it is impossible to say *a priori* that such conditioning would not carry with it limitation of knowledge and possibility of error in judgment. Shall we then base the claim on the total worth,

dignity, strength, purity, of his life and teachings—what the Gospel of John calls his glory? Then we possess outside of him a standard of worth, dignity, purity, and the like by which we try him, and that standard is the real ultimate of our thinking.

Let it be observed that we are not denying to Jesus infallibility of teaching, least of all affirming abnormality of character. What is affirmed is that since no external evidence can of itself establish his infallibility, the very affirmation of it itself assumes a standard of judgment which is thereby made more ultimate as a test than Christ himself. This brings us to recognize that—

9. An absolute external standard is not to be found. Only he who has himself a religious experience and who is able to distinguish better from worse in experience can even begin the process of constructing a system of theology. A dog cannot theologize unless the dog is a very different creature from what we have usually supposed him to be. A non-religious man, one without religious experience and incapable of it, might conceivably construct a biblical theology, though he would certainly be greatly embarrassed in the task and handicapped by the lack of sympathy and insight which personal experience alone could give. But such a man would be wholly incapable of work in systematic theology.

A man, himself the subject of religious experience and knowing that experience capable of betterment or degradation, possesses in this experience a base line, a yardstick, a thermometer—use what figure you will—a criterion by which he may form a notion of the value of other experiences, be moved to avoid some and to aspire after others which he has not yet himself possessed. And such appreciation in turn begets experience, for appreciation is itself an experience. In such appreciation is the basis of possibility both for betterment of experience, and for the organized statement of what makes for betterment. Here, then, is the beginning of theology. But this is only the beginning. For—

10. Experiences are capable not only of estimation but also of interpretation or explanation, and because of this fact they may yield us not only value-judgments but existential judgments also. Just as in every other field of experience and knowledge, so here we set up hypotheses as to the cause of our experience. God is such a hypothe-

sis; the possibility of human fellowship with him is another. And these hypotheses we test, judging of them according as they unify experience or tend to confusion and defeat; according as the holding of them makes for the betterment or the degeneration of experience.

11. But through experience and the estimation and explanation of it we also arrive in turn at estimates of other persons and of their theological judgments. He whose experience is such as we have found good, or which in some way akin to ours is yet better than ours, or such as being emulated by others tends to their betterment, such a man is, we judge, himself good. He whose interpretations of experience make for logical unification of experience, or for the betterment of experience in those who accept them, is, we judge, wise. Him whom we have found good and wise where we could test him, we judge to be good and wise even when we have no opportunity to test him.

12. Thus we arrive at a twofold type of judgment: (*a*) a judgment of experiences and interpretations of experience by our own experiences and interpretations of experience, and (*b*) a judgment of persons by our judgments of their experiences and judgments. And through this judgment of persons we are able again indirectly to arrive at a judgment of experiences and judgments. The experiences of the good man we presume to be good, the judgments of the wise man we presume to be true.

13. But the term experience must not be taken in a narrow, individualistic sense. Nations have experiences as well as men. An experience begun in one generation may be completed in another, and its deepest meaning may be wholly missed by the interpreter who fails to connect together the beginning and the end and all the intermediate steps. The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. The aspirations and hopes of one age find fulfilment in a far later one. A great event, such as the Babylonian captivity, or the death of Jesus, becomes a generator of experience and a stimulus to interpretation for generations thereafter. The theologian therefore must not narrow his vision to experiences or the interpretation of experiences that begin and end within the soul of one man or even the life time of a generation. Nor can the systematic theologian limit his vision to the experiences of Israel as recorded in the Bible. All human experience belongs to



him, and his field is far wider than that of the biblical theologian. Moreover in the biblical field itself, the systematic theologian is not wholly dependent upon biblical theology. For the latter does not strictly speaking undertake the interpretation of events for itself. Such interpretation is as legitimate a part of the modern study of the Bible as of the work of the ancient prophet, and its assured results are legitimate material for systematic theology. But the process does not strictly belong to biblical theology, which is concerned only to write a history of biblical experience and thought.

14. This leads us to a restatement of the content of systematic theology. It is composed of judgments concerning what is, what is possible, what is good, in the sphere of religion. Its judgments are in part existential judgments which are reached through the explanations of experience and the subsequent verification of these explanations. They are in part value-judgments of experience, which are reached in part through observation of the effect of the experiences in question, in part on the basis of an estimation of the persons whose the experiences are, or who hold the judgments. Its field of experience is that of the race.

15. This in turn brings us back to the problem of the relation of biblical to systematic theology. The former gives us an orderly, historical account of the religious experiences of the men of Israel, and of the explanation of these experiences which were put forth by them, in part each explaining his own, in part the prophets explaining those of others. Now if to this history we bring an experience of our own and an acquired capacity for judging of experiences of others and of their explanations, we may estimate each part of this history by the double test of impersonal and of personal judgment. We may perhaps profitably classify our judgments, recognizing four classes: (a) Judgments that an experience is good or bad, making for or against well-being; (b) Judgments that an explanation of experience is probable or improbable; (c) Judgments that a person is good or bad, with a corresponding probability that his experience in a given particular is worthy or unworthy of emulation; (d) Judgments that a person is a wise or unwise interpreter of experience with a corresponding probability that his explanation or judgment is in a given case correct or incorrect. Of course the terms good and bad, wise

and unwise, are used and recognized as capable of covering many degrees of the quality which they denote.

16. But it is self-evident that the deeper and broader our own experience, the better fitted we shall be to form trustworthy judgments concerning experiences of others, concerning the interpretations of others, and the goodness and wisdom of others in general. It is not less evident that the broader our knowledge of the experience of the world, and the more we know of the richest and best experience of men, the more competent we shall be to form judgments in the sphere of theology. When to this we add that by general confession the Bible contains the richest record of religious experience that the world possesses, and that biblical theology is the orderly history of this experience and its interpretations by the great men of Israel, it follows that three things are of prime importance for the systematic theologian: (a) Deep personal experience; (b) Thorough knowledge of the Bible; (c) Broad knowledge of the history of Christian experience and of human experience in general.

17. What judgments concerning this history in general, and the great factors of it in particular, can one who possesses these qualifications pronounce? I certainly shall not claim to possess the necessary qualifications, but if I may venture to sum up the concurrent judgment of those who have possessed them, we may formulate the following propositions:

a) The experience recorded in the Bible is of exceptional character and of pre-eminent value in the generating and betterment of religious experience.

b) The judgments of the prophets of Israel based on these experiences are of varying value, but as a whole, of an exceptionally high order. The conception of God began perhaps at a relatively low point, yet reached an elevation and dignity unequalled in the history of human thought previously or elsewhere when unaffected by this thought.

c) This pre-eminent experience reaches its acme in Jesus Christ. He is *the* good man of the race.

d) This exceptionally valuable interpretation of experience also reaches its climax in Jesus. In the realm of religion and morals, strictly so called, he has led the experience of men since, and wherever put to

the test has been verified. In the realm of things closely related to religion the extent to which he accepted current ideas which have not stood the test of subsequent investigation has yet to be determined with accuracy.

e) For none of the prophets who preceded or followed Jesus can infallibility or inerrancy be claimed. The preliminary test by which we establish their general standing gives them high rank among religious thinkers, but does not obviate the necessity of testing each of their judgments separately.

18. In the teaching of the apostles we must distinguish: (a) Experiences; (b) Explanations of experience; (c) Opinions adopted from current thought and having no direct relation to their own religious experience. The last named, adopted opinions, may be correct, but they are to be estimated in view of their origin. Their own explanations of experience have the value that belongs to them as the explanations that commended themselves to intelligent and godly men who had themselves had the experiences. The experiences we may ourselves estimate and explain by the best light we possess.

19. In studying the teaching of Jesus it is necessary not only to make the distinctions named in the preceding section, but also to distinguish the teaching from the record of it. The latter may really be later than the former and reflect conceptions quite different from those of Christ himself.

20. In estimating values, account must be taken of: (a) The source of an opinion or explanation of experience; (b) The author's own valuation of the elements of his thought; (c) The general weight or value of the prophet or teacher; (d) The verification of the opinion or judgment in subsequent history or experience. These principles may be illustrated by Paul's eschatology. If we ascertain that this element of his thought was derived from current Jewish thinking directly or through the medium of primitive Christianity, and then ascertain that in the Jewish circles in which it originated it was the product of free imaginative speculation, with only its basis in their faith in God, this will properly enter into our valuation of it. If we judge that he himself attached little value to it, accepting it, but holding it with rather loose grip, as is the case, e. g., with his theory of the origin of sin in Adam, it will come to us with correspondingly less of

that weight, whatever it is, which we attach to it just because a man of his deep experience and keen thought held it. If subsequent history has wholly discredited it by the non-occurrence of the events which he anticipated, this fact must of course enter into our valuation both of this particular doctrine and of the men who held it. On the other hand, if Paul's doctrine of faith is found to be an immediate product of the apostle's profoundest experience, if he himself made it central in his own thinking and religious life, if our estimate of his thinking in the purely religious sphere is justly a high one, if the acceptance of this doctrine by others has vindicated it in the effect on their lives, our estimate of Paul's doctrine of faith will be very different from that which we have suggested for his eschatology. Numerous other illustrations might be given, as, for example, the Logos doctrine of John, Paul's doctrine of the eventual salvation of all Israel, baptismal regeneration, and the like.

21. Our whole position may be summed up in the statement that biblical theology furnishes a genetic account of the religious experiences and judgments of that race which has had the richest religious experience and the greatest interpreters of such experience of any race on earth. Systematic theology derives from it most valuable data as to what experiences are possible to men and women and the conditions of their occurrence; it estimates the value of these experiences and that of the judgment of these interpreters, criticizes opinions on the basis of their source, their author's estimate of them, and their verification in the experience of the race, and organizes the result in a systematic statement of normative truth with a view to the further development of the religious experience of men.